

Written Testimony of Gilbert Sanchez¹
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Regarding the Reauthorization of the Head Start Program
Before the
United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

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Thank you Mr. Chairman for inviting me to express our tribal government's views on the needs of Tribal Head Start programs which we hope will be addressed through the Reauthorization of the Head Start Act. This written statement describes the Laguna Head Start and early childhood program and discusses a number of issues and concerns. In summary, these issues and concerns are that:

- Direct funding to tribes should be provided on a contractual basis with the federal government, so that tribes can comprehensively provide Head Start and early childhood programs and bring other federal resources to these programs.
- Funding levels for all programs are inadequate and need to be increased.
- The 15% limitation on administrative costs is too low. The Pueblo needs to fully recover administrative costs.
- The administration of performance standards and evaluations should be improved.
- Separate program funds must be made available to meet our facilities and transportation needs.
- National standards and assessment criteria must accommodate and support the provision of language and cultural education.

Laguna Head Start and Early Childhood Programs

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The six villages of the Pueblo of Laguna are located in west central New Mexico approximately 45 miles west of Albuquerque, New Mexico and 25 miles east of the city of Grants. Most of our 8,000 members reside in these villages and although they are connected by a common road system, the villages are widely dispersed throughout our reservation. Laguna has operated a Head Start program since 1965 and we are proud to have one of the few Indian Early Head Start programs located in New Mexico. Today, these programs and others, are managed by the Laguna Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood (DEC). These programs were consolidated into a division within our Education Department so that we could provide comprehensive education programs to our community, from birth through adulthood.

The DEC administers Preschool Head Start, Early Head Start, Child Care, Home-Based and Early Intervention, and the “Free to Grow” Program. Free to Grow is a community-wide initiative to build stronger families and healthier communities to ensure that every child has a home that is free of substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. DEC programs serve infants, toddlers, three-year-olds, preschoolers, children with special needs, children in protective custody, and children with developmental delays or who have at-risk conditions. DEC also serves expectant mothers, working parents, and parents attending educational training programs. Our family services include education, health, nutrition, and disability services, developmental screenings and assessments, home visits and therapies, and parent training, consultation, and respite and service coordination.

The operations of the Early Childhood Division are based upon a strong philosophy and belief that supporting and promoting families will contribute to a strong and healthy community. The DEC mission celebrates and supports the diversity of families through providing services that are family-driven, coordinated, integrated, culturally appropriate and comprehensive. The physical and emotional

environments of all DEC programs and services are designed to promote positive experiences for all involved and to maintain an atmosphere which helps both children and families feel loved and nurtured.

Direct Funding: Laguna's family driven and comprehensive approach requires us to work hard at honoring our strong commitment to the community and to creatively unify the many federal and other program opportunities to support the seamless approach we have established. Laguna was enthusiastic about President Bush's initiative to encourage the consolidation of early childhood programs with Head Start programs. However, we were disappointed that the President did not initiate this helpful concept for tribes. Because of this, Laguna is delighted and supportive of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for considering proposals to establish direct tribal funding demonstration programs. Direct funding programs make a great deal of sense to Laguna because the mechanisms being discussed are ideal for Laguna's family-driven and comprehensive approach. Laguna supports a direct, government-to-government approach that will enable us to:

- Establish our own performance standards and compliance criteria;
- Develop and implement native language and cultural immersion programs;
- Develop streamlined reporting systems for managing multiple programs and to minimize administrative costs; and
- Identify barriers to the effective use of federal, tribal, state, and private resources.

However, we must point out that the success of tribal demonstration projects will be hampered by multi-program and multi-agency requirements unless there are federal administrative reforms.

Laguna Pueblo knows this from experience--our Education Department accounting staff must manage more than 19 funding sources and 44 funds or programs with six different fiscal years, and six different sets of auditing, programmatic, and reporting requirements. Federal administrative accounting reforms

should be implemented to help smooth out the edges of multiple program management. To this end, Laguna supports the following:

- Tribes should be able to combine funds from Head Start, early childhood programs, and other federal programs into a single administration system;
- Federal agencies such as the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Interior, should be directed to collaborate on how to combine their resources into a single service delivery mechanism;
- Federal agencies should be directed to harmonize their statutory requirements and they should be assisted by enabling them to waive requirements where it is appropriate, and conducive to seamless and comprehensive program and service delivery;
- Integration tools should be developed and used by federal agencies, including memorandums of understanding, to streamline reporting, auditing and oversight of programs; and
- Federal agencies should jointly provide multi-program technical assistance.

Successful tribal demonstration programs will need other federal administration reforms to facilitate interagency fund transfers, eliminate separate record-keeping requirements, and to allow tribes to receive full administrative cost compensation without overage reductions.

Funding Levels: The funding levels for tribal programs are inadequate. Like the National Head Start Directors Association, Laguna supports increased funding levels and also supports proposals that do the following:

- Allow flexible use of federal funds for a variety of needs unique to tribes and other rural communities.
- Allow greater federal assistance levels when tribes cannot meet match requirements due to the

lack of resources, inability to use depreciation and usage allowances, or when they must expend additional funds to purchase facilities, equipment, materials, and additional staff to meet supplemental requests, required quality improvements, or to address compliance issues.

- Allow the use of other federal resources to meet the match requirements; and
- Allow the retention of carry-over monies without the reduction of new year funding.

Administration of performance standards and monitoring of programs. The President proposes to strengthen Head Start programs by creating new quality standards for school readiness skills and to require the use of scientifically based programs that promote school readiness and meet quality standards. Laguna supports eliminating the academic achievement gap for disadvantaged children and establishing better programmatic and financial measures. However, measures of achievement and programmatic excellence should not be so narrowly defined nor solely modeled upon the management and administrative capacities of tax supported public systems, or programs with greater access to other community services and resources

In the assessment of programmatic excellence, Laguna supports better evaluation tools and methods—but not more evaluation. Laguna’s experience with the evaluation process has not been ideal. Emphasis is placed on rigid and mechanical compliance which results in pointing out all the ways of failure and not on providing encouragement, positive instruction, or support of systemic change. If DHHS evaluations could be conducted by local or regional professionals or if DHHS employees were encouraged to acquire better professional skills and attitudes, the evaluation process could be more collegial, consultative and professional. Using local experts would also make evaluations less costly and effective (reduction of travel costs and ability to spend more time on evaluation), and would reduce their excessiveness.

Administrative Cost Limitation: The financial assistance received by the Pueblo for administering the Head Start Program includes a limitation of 15% on administration costs. Because the 15% includes the non-federal match requirement, it is very difficult to comply with this limitation when tribes have few resources to contribute. Although efficiencies can be achieved through federal administrative reforms, these reforms have to be implemented in order to provide relief. Raising the limitation is also necessary and the Secretary's waiver authority must be exercised more liberally. If there is doubt about whether this issue is significant, Laguna recommends that a cost study be undertaken to examine the administrative realities of providing program services in tribal communities. We are confident that the results of such a study will confirm the need for administrative reforms that allow more flexibility for tribes to provide greater administrative cost allowances.

The need for funds to address our facilities and transportation needs. Funding must be made available to meet our many facilities and transportation needs to ensure that tribal children and families can receive and have access to Head Start and early childhood programs. At Laguna, we have a constant wait list of 35 to 50 eligible children who cannot attend Head Start or benefit from our other early childhood programs, because our facilities cannot accommodate them. Currently, our early Head Start program is housed in an 86-year-old building that was constructed in 1917. We also use modular buildings that have a functional use of less than four more years. Also, costly repairs for maintenance are required. There are no alternative Head Start or early childhood facilities available to wait-listed children because the Laguna program is the only one within fifty miles of our somewhat remote location.

Also, our buses transport children all year round on a daily basis and travel many miles on unpaved roads. They accumulate great "wear and tear." New and adequately equipped buses are

expensive and they must be upgraded consistently in order to meet the transportation needs of the programs. The cost of providing or maintaining facilities and reliable transportation, must come from funds outside the regular Head Start operating budget. If facility and transportation needs are addressed with our basic Head Start operation funds, it would have a very negative impact on the program's ability to provide quality services by well-trained personnel. Separate funds must be set aside and made available to tribes to renovate or construct facilities, and for purchase, maintenance and repair of transportation equipment.

The Importance of Tribal Preservation of Language and Culture . Laguna Pueblo highly values thinking, education and families, but we also value traditional culture and ceremony. The early years of childhood are critical to lifelong development not only in the cognitive and physical sense, but also in the social and cultural sense. Our customs hold that the children belong to everyone. Our tradition of educating children in the community where each adult works with every child at home or in other settings, is much changed. Adults must now spend a great deal of time earning income and are not as available to children as they once were. Therefore, the traditional means of providing language and cultural education must be supplemented by our education systems including the Head Start and early childhood programs. A young child's beginning conceptions of some of the basic elements of language and culture are important at Laguna, for lifelong success as an individual and as a contributing member of Laguna Society.

An important part of cultural education is language retention. The culture of our people cannot be fully understood unless language is fluent within each of us. Traditionally, language and culture were passed down from generation to generation by parents and family members in each household. However, the influence of non-Native culture has changed that process.

To be successful individuals and contributing members of Laguna society, our children must obtain a cultural education. We are concerned that the great emphasis on other types of learning will undermine our important efforts in language and cultural transference. To be Laguna, and to say that Laguna exists in the world--Laguna's world view, values, attitudes, beliefs, rules, and skills must be transferred to each generation. Laguna history, kinship roles, clan systems and life-cycle ceremonies must be known so that the Laguna identity of an individual or the community, can be said to exist. Our stories, language, ceremonies, and other ways of conveying what is uniquely Laguna, contain Laguna knowledge that consists of our particular understanding of earth sciences; physical, emotional and spiritual well-being; positive and inappropriate personal and community conduct; and other ways of being distinctly Laguna. These cultural life ways are the backbone of our society. Like everything else that moves and has power--stories, language, and ceremony are living things that must be nurtured.

The Bush Administration is developing a National Reporting System to measure children's language and literacy skills in order to track child outcomes and progress in educational achievement. This is not an incorrect idea but the proposed system only values non-cultural learning. If child readiness and programmatic success are to be measured only by non-cultural learning outcomes, Tribal programs may not be able to fully measure up, and this would be exceedingly unfair. Cultural education and the provision of it, must not be discounted in the evaluation of readiness skills, nor in the evaluation of programmatic success.

Instead, native language and cultural education should be supported. The Native American Languages Act (Public Law 101-477) made it official federal policy to preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedoms of Native Americans to use, practice and develop their languages. We think that DHHS should embrace this policy.

Our Pueblo also needs assistance to access the nature of native language use among different generations and the cultural knowledge base that exists in the community, through the systematic collection and analysis of data. We need to research, and have access to research and methodologies that will provide successful models for language and cultural preservation. We must disperse the information we gather, and train volunteers and instructors. Through these efforts, Laguna can begin re-seeding the community with language and cultural knowledge so that the unique phenomenon of being Laguna, can grow, flourish, and exist forever.

Conclusion. Again, I want to thank you for allowing the Pueblo of Laguna to present its views. Our Pueblo is obligated to do the best we can for our families and children. That is why we are here today and that is why we have offered comments that directly represent the views of our community. In the process of reviewing Tribal Head Start and early childhood needs, Laguna urges this committee and others, the President and the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Interior, to fully consult with tribal governments to ensure that no tribe is left behind, and that the best proposals reflect the considerable wisdom of tribes throughout the country. We look forward to working with this Committee and any others to improve the quality of comprehensive education in our communities.